

New Stories of THE MYSTERIOUS WAYS OF

WANG FOO

By SIDNEY C. PARTRIDGE

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W.—The Coral Button

CRACKLE! Crackle! Crackle! Bang! Bang! Bang! went the firecrackers which the coolies were carrying in front of the wedding sedan-chair proceeding along Queen's Road in Hong Kong. It was such a common every-day occurrence that outside of the usual pleasant sensation associated with the noise and the fire and the smoke, it did not attract any very special attention from the native passers-by, but two European gentlemen, who were on their way to the hotel, stopped to comment upon it.

"Sounds mighty like the old-fashioned Fourth of July at home, doesn't it?" remarked Colonel Harold Westinghouse, the newly-arrived Consul for the United States, to Captain John Marshall, late of New Bedford, Mass., and now acting agent for the American river-steamers to Canton.

"It surely does," replied the latter, "and you notice that the Chinese small boys take just about as much delight in it as the American one used to do—that is, before a lot of pious old folks got scared and took his powder and crackers away from him."

"They don't seem to scrimp themselves at all; why, that fellow must have a half a dozen packs tied on to the end of that fish-pole there, and he is setting them all off—one right after the other."

"Yes, and besides the little fellows, you see he's got a lot of those big cannon-crackers tied in with the bunch. They're the ones that make the little-cha-pollers jump when they go off in the middle of the street."

"I wonder what the real idea of the thing is, anyhow? It can't be just simply to make a noise. The Chinese are too thrifty and prudent to waste any money just on an empty noise. You mark my words, there's philosophy in their madness. I believe these hard-headed people have some theory about it that you and I don't understand at all."

"Oh, I suppose it's on the same principle as the joss-money they buy and throw overboard every time the ship starts. It helps to give good luck for the voyage and to keep the devil away. I asked our ship's comrade about it a trip or two ago. Says I to him: 'Ah Sam, what for Chihman he throw all that joss-pa in the sea every time ship sails, eh?' 'Glongee velly good joss,' says he; 'Chihman talkee plenty places debbil have got in air all same velly hunny. He wantee chow-chow rice but no got cash, gosses he no pay him plenty paper money, debbil velly angry sendee plenty wind and rain and makee that sea velly lough. Ship no can go plover, savee?'"

"Oh, I see," said the Consul, with a smile. "It's just a kind of a fair weather insurance, as we would say."

"Yes, that's about the size of it," replied the skipper. These hobgoblins—or whatever they are that they believe in—say to these poor dupes: 'Here now, you pay up so much cash before you start, or we'll make it mighty unpleasant for you when this ship gets out to sea.'"

"But of course it isn't real money they throw overboard."

"Not on your life. It's just this cheap counterfeit stuff you see them selling in the shops. You can get about five hundred dollars worth of it for ten cents. They tell me that the devil don't think the difference between this and real money."

"That's what it looks like. But that's only one of the many ways they have of fooling them. However, it's too big a subject for you and me to attempt to unravel. If we should try to get at the inside of any of these superstitions, we'd be over our heads before we knew it. I just leave them alone and simply say, 'Joss Pidin, and that covers it all.'"

"Yes, even in the short time I've lived here, I've discovered that 'Joss Pidin' covers almost everything the European doesn't understand about the strange religious ways of this people. But, see! Here comes just the man that can tell us all about it"—extending his hand in a cordial welcome to Mr. Wang Foo, the famous Chinese detective—we'll refer the whole matter to him for explanation. Mr. Wang, the Captain and I were just talking about firecrackers and wondering what the real secret of their constant use and popularity among the Chinese is. There's no subject connected with your people that you cannot enlighten us poor Westerners upon and we will feel grateful for any light you can throw on this."

"Delighted to serve you in any way that I can, gentlemen," replied the Chinese guest in his usual cordial and very courteous manner. "But don't stop here right in the road. Across the way is the tea-house of my old friend Long Tuck & Co.; they have a broad and spacious veranda there at our disposal; let us sit down and be comfortable."

When they had found three comfortable rattan chairs on the cool brick veranda and had sipped the tea which Long Tuck & Co.'s comrade placed before them, Wang Foo opened his cigarette case and offered each of his friends a roll of the famous old English "Three Castles."

"You are inquiring about the philosophy of the fire-cracker," he began, "gentlemen, to be candid with you, there's a certain philosophy about it, though we hardly ever dignify it by that name. The theory—if theory I may call it—is simply this: The Chinese believe that the about them is filled with all sorts of little spirits that float about like the moths in the sunbeams and have to be supplied with food and clothing and the necessities of life just as if they were material creatures of flesh and blood. In addition to the ordinary tribute which they expect from all passers-by upon the streets, they levy special taxes, as it were, upon all special occasions, such as festival processions, weddings, funerals, etc. This is what the people resent and the fire-cracker is their means of showing it and of securing immunity from the unjust demands. Whenever a procession starts down the street, the spirits flock to the front and attempt to block the way. This means that they must be got rid of and pushed to one side and the fire-cracker does it most effectively by stunning them with its short, sharp report, and rendering them temporarily powerless, thus clearing the road and the air and allowing the procession to pass in peace."

"You mean the crackers knock these little devils senseless, by doing that?"

"Precisely so."

"Well," interrupted the Consul, "what are the big crackers for? I see that every now and then they set off one of these."

"Ah, that brings up a very interesting point," replied the host, as he leaned over and deposited his cigarette ash on the tray, "regarding the organization of the forces of the invisible world. In the religion of the Western world, angelic forces—both good and bad—have their ranks and their degrees, have they not? The demons in the Christian Scriptures when asked their name replied, 'Our name is legion.' It is exactly so in the Chinese conception. The spirits of the air are divided into regiments and companies exactly as the soldiers are in the native army. They are similar to the grades in the armies of Imperial Rome, having their hundred men under a centurion and their thousand men under a chiliarch. Now inasmuch as an officer is much more important and valuable than a private, it will naturally require—so the people reason—a larger and stronger fire-cracker to stun him. That is why at every hundredth crack they insert a large one to stun the centurion and at every thousandth a still larger one to stun the chiliarch."

"So they really knock the whole regiment down flat, do they not?" Officers, privates and all? And when they recover consciousness again it's too late to catch them. That's the idea, is it not?"

"Exactly so. And that explains why they do not set them off in the little square packs that you use in America. Those are only made for export; we do not use them here. Those 'fish-poles,' as you call them, enable us to hang a whole string of crackers in the air and wave-in the officers in their proper rank and places. That is why we call it 'Fang Pien' or 'cracking the whip,' don't you see? Now, tell me how many American boys who use fire-crackers have ever heard of the Chinese idea of using them?"

"Not one in fifty thousand, Mr. Wang," replied his friends in unison, as they rose to depart and thanked him for his explanation.

The Consul drew forth from his pocket a handsome silver cigarette case and, offering one of its perfumed Turkish rolls to the detective, said as he did so, "I want you to try one of these, sir; they are the very genuine thing just arrived from the sacred city of Mecca and made by the most famous manufacturer in the city of Mohamet the Prophet, sir, not one of them to be had for love or money in all Hong Kong. I can guarantee that. These were presented to me by the Captain of the British surveying ship, just back from a cruise in the Red Sea and along the shores of Arabia. Light one of them now, sir, and if you enjoy it as much as I do, I will ask you to accept a small box of them with my compliments."

"Wang Foo reached out his hand and drew one of the delicately patterned rolls of Turkish tobacco from the case. As he did so, he suddenly started and, looking at the case intently, remarked to his friends, 'Why, that's rather a singular coincidence, isn't it? You and I seem to carry our little smokes in the identical kind of holder, do we not? Just let me make sure of it,' he added, smiling and drawing his own out of his sleeve. 'Yes! Absolutely the same, style, engraving, everything. And see here,' he exclaimed, as he pointed to a handsome oval piece of red coral set in the cover, 'the initial jewel corresponds exactly to the other.'"

The Consul took the two silver cases into his hand and holding them side by side and comparing them, remarked, "Well, Mr. Wang, if they were human beings I should certainly put them down for twins, for even their own parents would have a job to tell them apart. That's quite unusual, isn't it, in a country where everything is made by hand? I've always understood that no two pieces of ivory or silver or anything of that kind were ever exactly alike. In fact, it is quite impossible ever to get a pair duplicate, as so many European shoppers find out to their disappointment. How about that, Mr. Wang?"

"You are quite right, Mr. Consul, our native workmen rather pride themselves on the fact that no two products of their skill are ever exactly alike. There is resemblance, but not identity. We Chinese dislike the cold, hard, mechanical duplication of artistic wares—the kind you turn out by hundreds in Birmingham, for instance—we say it violates the whole law and system of nature. No two stars in the sky, no two birds in the air, no two flowers in the field, not even two human faces among all the million of mankind are ever identically the same."

"Well, then, how do you account for the fact of these two cigarette-cases being exact duplicates, the one of the other?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, they are not duplicates, though at first sight they might appear to be so. There is a striking and a most important and significant difference, when once your attention is called to it. Look! Do you not see it? The silver case of the Red Cloud, just off the Avenue of Fragrant Waters. Old Chang, the gate-keeper, admitted him, bowed him to a seat, produced the tea and pipes and, after a few preliminary greetings, took the message and delivered it to Wang Foo in the upper chamber. The latter opened it and read as follows:

"Consulate of the United States, Hong Kong.

My dear Mr. Wang:

Referring to the silver cigarette-case about which we were talking yesterday, I find that Mrs. Westinghouse purchased it from a silver dealer who came to the Consulate one day and exhibited his wares in the drawing-room. He claimed to represent one of the largest establishments in the Colony, but, strange to say, he has never been able to locate the place. Very cordially yours, Harold Westinghouse, Consul."

"I don't care how he looks, he has got to give that picture back!" exclaimed Miss May, with a stamp of her foot. "I am going to drive over there and tell him what I think of him. I am not going to let my picture in the hands of a stranger."

True to her promise, Miss May drove out to the old Ramsey Place, next forenoon. She had been mad all night, and her just anger had not cooled yet.

"No, I think not," said the photographer, with a sly smile. "I think he is an artist from New York, and is spending his vacation at the old Ramsey Place, out on the Holden Road. I think he wanted the picture for his collection or maybe he is going to paint it. 'I don't like how he looks, he has got to give that picture back!'—exclaimed Miss May, with a stamp of her foot. 'I am going to drive over there and tell him what I think of him. I am not going to let my picture in the hands of a stranger.'"

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He laid it down upon the table, signed the chit-book and returned it to the messenger. Then, closing the door, he took out of his table-drawer the cigarette-case and holding it up said to himself as he lighted one of the "Three Castles": "So, So! The left-hand silver shell with its half of the sacred coral button was sold to the Consul's wife by an unknown dealer, was it? That makes a most interesting link in the chain. The old Abbot and I will have a very pleasant evening together over this," and stretching out his long chair of carved bamboo, the Prince of Chinese Detectives closed his eyes and set himself to thinking and thinking, while the wreathing smoke floated upward to the rafters.

Among the most treasured possessions of the family of His Excellency Chang, the Viceroy at Canton, was the famous Coral Button of the Minga, which had actually been worn on state occasions by His Imperial Majesty Kwang Hoo and had come into the keeping of the Changs through their being descended from the old State Treasurer at Nanking. The so-called "Button" was of course not anything more than a fastener, but it was the beautiful egg-shaped jewel which, in its setting of flange gold, adorned like a polished knob the top of the Viceroy's official head-dress.

His Excellency had worn it at the midnight ceremonies in the Temple of Confucius and the following morning when his Secretary was carefully folding it up in its wrapper of yellow silk, and we must be 'silent and sagacious' as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and proceed to obey."

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar, if either hand or tongue disobeys thy august command!" was the Secretary's pledge to secrecy.

Within three days after the discovery of the theft, word had been quietly conveyed to Wang Foo that His Excellency wished to consult him on a matter of the utmost importance and would be glad to have him come up to Canton at his earliest opportunity. As it was necessary to avoid even the slightest suspicion, could he not come in some suitable disguise? A sentence of nine words in which the fifth and sixth words could indicate the particular dress would be expected as an answer.

Wang Foo, who appreciated this native mode of conveying a secret correspondence, mailed the next day to the Viceroy a slip of red paper, without any heading or signature, and containing merely these words:

"Tou Shu Tuk Yiu King Shiu Tou Tse Mang."

(The scholar with his spectacles repairs the defects of nature.)

His Excellency duly received it, marked mentally the fifth and sixth words, "spectacles—repairs," and knew that ere long the most skillful detector of crime in all the Empire would knock at his door in the disguise of a vendor of glasses. And he was not mistaken.

"Tell the second gate-keeper," he said to his personal servant as he arose from his morning nap, "that if a traveling optician should happen to come along today, I have a pair or two of spectacles that need attention."

"It is already done as the Great Man says," was the reply: "we humbly announce that the repairer of glasses is entering in the outer court."

"Bring him to my inner apartment without delay!"

"The Great Man speaketh well—it is already done according to his august wishes."

"I can fit your Excellency's glasses much better in the darkened room than in the strong light of day," remarked the optician, as he motioned towards the inner apartment, and gathering up his boxes and his tools, he followed the Viceroy into the secret chamber.

When all the coast was clear, Wang Foo and Chang the Viceroy sat down quietly over their tea and pipes to discuss the mysterious vanishing of the Coral Button of the Ming Dynasty. All the circumstances of the loss and its discovery were gone over and the names of all the possible culprits were softly whispered between them, as also the different means that might have been used to dispose of it. The detective asked his usual careful and leading questions and made copious notes in his little leather-covered book. One important thing was mentioned until the end of the interview, namely: the Coral Button was in two pieces, fitting so perfectly together that the joint was never noticed and held in place by a delicate and almost invisible wire of gold—the imitation one of glass was simply one solid piece. Who had taken them? How had he been able to do it? What disposition had he made of them? These were the three uppermost questions in Wang Foo's mind as he sat on the forward deck of the returning steamer and saw the net of suspicion and guilt drawing closer and closer around the form of "Crystal Ladder" the Secretary.

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"You flatter me, sir. I have nothing special to report on, but I have come to ask a very peculiar and delicate question of you, and as I am looking significantly in the direction of the Consul's residence—"of your good wife, sir."

"Well, what may it be? Always delighted to accommodate you when I can, you know."

"It is simply this: I have come to ask you to allow me to purchase of you the silver cigarette case which Mrs. Westinghouse gave you for Christmas."

"You want to have it to go with yours, then, to complete the set, do you?"

"Oh, not at all, sir! I shouldn't presume to make the request for a purely personal reason or for any selfish motive whatever. As a matter of fact, I am not making the request for myself at all, but for an old and very dear friend, from whom the articles were stolen and who is willing to pay almost any price to have them back again."

"Of course, Mr. Wang, neither Mrs. Westinghouse nor I wish to be the receivers or purchasers of stolen property, and if you are quite positive as to the facts, why here is the case now, and you can take it away with you for exactly what we gave for it. I presume you will add your own to it so as to make the set complete, will you not?"

"Most certainly, sir, and I am more indebted to you than I can express."

"It wouldn't be proper for me to ask your friend's name, would it?"

"Perfectly proper for you to ask it, sir, but I regret to say, absolutely impossible for me to answer. It is a matter that involves the honor of a family of very high standing and I am bound to inviolate secrecy."

Wrapping the cigarette-case carefully up in a handkerchief of yellow silk—after having shared with the Consul the last two rolls of tobacco which it contained—Wang Foo handed over on the spot the full value of the purchase and hurried back to his home in Red Cloud Alley.

Early in the evening the old Abbot arrived from the Temple of the Queen of Heaven and ascended to the detective's upper sanctum, where he saw the two silver cases lying next to each other upon the table and Wang Foo rose to greet him, and the two conversed in their own language, from which he had very carefully removed them.

"You see, Venerable Father, they are both here," he exclaimed. "Your own being correct. Instead of trying to dispose of them separately, he had them made into ornaments for use at the meetings of 'The Society of the Double Shells,' one of the worst and most exclusive gambling halls that have ever disgraced the Colony."

"Yes, and probably stole them in the first place to pay his debts to some of the other members and then begged them to remain in the Club Room as ornaments in the disguise of a vendor of glasses. And he was not mistaken."

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"Good morning, Mr. Westinghouse," said a Chinese caller as the hall-boy ushered him into the office at the Consulate.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Wang," replied the Consul, as he rose to greet his visitor. "What new and interesting discovery have you got to report this morning? You know I have come to look for something settling now every time I see you coming down the path to the office door."

"You flatter me, sir. I have nothing special to report on, but I have come to ask a very peculiar and delicate question of you, and as I am looking significantly in the direction of the Consul's residence—"of your good wife, sir."

"Well, what may it be? Always delighted to accommodate you when I can, you know."

"Oh, not at all, sir! I shouldn't presume to make the request for a purely personal reason or for any selfish motive whatever. As a matter of fact, I am not making the request for myself at all, but for an old and very dear friend, from whom the articles were stolen and who is willing to pay almost any price to have them back again."

"Of course, Mr. Wang, neither Mrs. Westinghouse nor I wish to be the receivers or purchasers of stolen property, and if you are quite positive as to the facts, why here is the case now, and you can take it away with you for exactly what we gave for it. I presume you will add your own to it so as to make the set complete, will you not?"

"Most certainly, sir, and I am more indebted to you than I can express."

"It wouldn't be proper for me to ask your friend's name, would it?"

"Perfectly proper for you to ask it, sir, but I regret to say, absolutely impossible for me to answer. It is a matter that involves the honor of a family of very high standing and I am bound to inviolate secrecy."

Wrapping the cigarette-case carefully up in a handkerchief of yellow silk—after having shared with the Consul the last two rolls of tobacco which it contained—Wang Foo handed over on the spot the full value of the purchase and hurried back to his home in Red Cloud Alley.

Early in the evening the old Abbot arrived from the Temple of the Queen of Heaven and ascended to the detective's upper sanctum, where he saw the two silver cases lying next to each other upon the table and Wang Foo rose to greet him, and the two conversed in